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Start Toward Cleaner Air

WHEN President Nixon signed the clean air bill last Thursday, he called it the "most important piece of legislation" dealing with this problem. Complex and far-reaching as the legislation is, it might have been wise to note that it was but a small step. Even so, it is a step.

Congress has required that by late 1974, when auto makers bring out their 1975 models, exhaust systems must spew out 90 per cent less carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons than 1970 models. Nitrogen oxide emissions in 1976 model cars must be 90 per cent below current 1971 models. One-year extensions of the deadline can be granted by government at its discretion.

OUT OF the bill comes a new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which will assume control over air pollution programs previously run by Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Elliot Richardson.

EPA's administrator will have millions of dollars for control of existing air pollution, and more millions for research. One important aspect of this, for a city like Memphis, is that EPA can provide up to one-third of the operating cost of establishing or improving air quality control programs for a single municipality. If, for example, Memphis and West Memphis combined forces, the new law says that for two or more municipalities the federal aid can go as high as 70 per cent for planning and 60 per cent for operating costs. Also, where interstate regions are involved, the measure allows up to 100 per cent in federal funds for the first two years and 75 per cent thereafter.

A few weeks ago, in its December magazine, the National Geographic Society published a saffron-toned photo of downtown Los Angeles with this caption:

"It's 9:30 on a June morning in Los Angeles, and the air hangs heavy with carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, ox-

ides of nitrogen, plus such particulate matter as soot, pollen and dust. By noon the pall will be even thicker. This witches' brew of pollutants, spewed primarily by automobiles, interacts with sunshine to produce still other noxious compounds. The product of this photochemical reaction is popularly termed smog. When an overlying layer of warm air — temperature inversion — traps the smog in the Los Angeles basin, eyes and throats become irritated; for those with respiratory diseases, the haze may menace life itself. Paradoxically, Los Angeles has led the nation in enforcing strict standards for industrial and residential emissions. But automobile exhausts have yet to be effectively regulated."

Now we have legislation designed to cut off auto emissions. The nation still has to wait several years for the first signs of the effect of the law.

Fuel producers as well as auto makers face hefty fines and possible prison sentences if they do not comply.

The EPA administrator also is authorized to provide for research in the area of noise pollution. He can seek court injunctions against any source of air pollution if state or local authorities have not acted.

Authorized federal funds for the next three fiscal years total 1.1 billion dollars—a piddling amount compared with the problem.

But at least the nation is beginning to realize the seriousness of its pollution problems, and to move against them.

A MEMPHIAN need only look at his own sky on a day when there is a temperature inversion. A huge "doughnut" of air pollution sweeps 'round South and East Memphis, across the river westward into Arkansas, and back on the southwest side into Memphis again. It is an ugly halo.

The cartoon character Pogo, in the words of his creator Walt Kelly, put it this way: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

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